

I am sure that there were nice people in Egypt in Moses' time. It was a well-established civilization with highly developed arts, medicine, military science, and all the accouterments of a thriving society. People probably took their kids to the park on holidays, gave generous gifts to their friends when they got married, shared part of their salad when somebody wanted a bite. People are people, after all, and most of us enjoy other people and want to make the world a better place.

Moses would have known that. Although born a Hebrew, he had been raised as an Egyptian prince, and he would have spent plenty of time around lovely people who could be witty, thoughtful, and even kind. In fact the princess who raised him was so kind that she was a rebel, knowingly saving a Hebrew baby boy when her father had decreed that they should all be killed at birth. So I am sure that Moses personally knew a lot of very lovely Egyptians and enjoyed their respect and friendship.

Of course Egypt also had a dark side, and Moses had to be aware of that. That was its enslavement of many peoples including the Hebrews, his birth family. The Bible reflects a kind of double consciousness about slavery, because it clearly disapproves of Egypt enslaving the Hebrews, but it also shows the Israelites themselves owning slaves later, so that's a good reminder that people are inconsistent. Anyway, in the larger narrative of our faith tradition, Egypt has come to be known mostly for its dark side. It is the symbol we reach for when we want to evoke the inhumanity of human beings to each other, oppressive institutions and systematic cruelty. "Egypt" stands for all the ways that society can be structured to advantage the few at the expense of the many. But Egypt was also very likely the

home of lovely people of culture and wit, some of whom even had an Israelite friend or two.

So in the part of the story that the lectionary leaves out, Moses kills a man and then flees Egypt, knowing that he would be killed if he stays. He settles down, marries, and shepherds for his father-in-law, apparently resigned to a life in exile. Meanwhile the Israelites groan under their slavery, cry for help to God, and God takes notice of them. God calls Moses to go to Pharaoh to get the Israelites out of Egypt.

Moses has a lot of objections. “Who am I that I should go?” (Ex. 3:11). “Who are you?” (3:13). “What if the Egyptians don’t listen to me?” (Ex. 4:1-9). “I don’t know how to speak,” (4:10-12), and “Can’t you choose someone else?” (4:13). But I have to think that underlying all those objections is his whole formation as a nice Egyptian: “how can I perform such an adversarial role?” “I know that I’m a Hebrew—I’ve always known where I came from, and the only reason I killed that man was to defend the Hebrew slave he was beating. But I grew up with Egyptians. They’re good people. They work hard to be productive members of society. They obey all the laws. They raise their children right. It is not their fault that they were born into a society that enslaves Hebrews. This will rip up the fabric of Egyptian society, impoverish and distress a lot of good people. I am not the person to do this.” To which God replies, “Take in your hand the staff, with which you shall perform the signs.” And Moses goes.

We find ourselves unwillingly in a time and place of wrenching conflict. I just listened to an interview with Vanita Gupta, head of the Civil Rights Division of the

Justice Department under President Obama, who said that a lot of career employees there are daily asking themselves whether they are making things worse by staying as the Attorney General rolls back civil rights enforcement, or whether they would make things worse by going. Our politicians take positions that make no policy sense, but must be read through the lens of ideological Kabuki theater. African American men continue to die at the hands of panicked police, while their privileged allies are castigated for making a silent protest during the national anthem. The United Church of Christ has just come out with some graphics for local congregations to use on Facebook or Twitter, and one that I find compelling says, "Don't wonder what you would have been doing during the Civil Rights Movement. You're doing it now." Don't wonder what you would have been doing during the Civil Rights Movement. You're doing it now. We are living in the cultural pathology that is Egypt.

I'm sure we've all read Martin Luther King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail, written in 1963 in response to his colleagues in the clergy who called his protests "unwise and untimely." They were kind-hearted, hard-working, devout ministers who wanted justice, but not at the expense of public decorum. And King responds in part,

My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of

those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation.

This is not a call to action. I know that each one of us is already doing important things, and that we are all thoughtful people of good conscience who are constantly wondering if there is something more, or more effective, that we could do. I'm not calling you to action because I know you're already acting in the ways that seem best to you.

This is a call to resist staying in the lanes in which we are most comfortable. Moses desperately did not want to go back to Egypt as an advocate for Hebrew liberation, knowing what nice people would be hurt and angered by his advocacy. He did not want to re-present himself in Pharaoh's court as someone who did not respect or appreciate the fine people who had been his friends there. But there was no way to obey God's call for the liberation of the Hebrew people without doing things that would alienate his old friends—at least, those who would react to him without having a thoughtful, undefensive conversation with him. He had to let people be hurt and angry that he had gotten out of his lane, and that is very painful.

But the liberation from the velvet shackles of social expectations is still liberation, and in advocating for the Hebrew people, Moses himself became free. No longer an aristocrat constrained by social obligation, no longer an exile of ambiguous moral status, Moses finished growing up by getting out of his lane to do what needed to be done. There was no subtle or complex way to please everybody and disrupt nothing, and he just went ahead and said what needed to be said to Pharaoh until finally Pharaoh broke and the seas parted and the Hebrew people were out of Egypt. It was hard, but I think it was simple. Here's what the poet David

Whyte has written:

THE OPENING OF EYES

That day I saw beneath dark clouds,
the passing light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
I knew then, as I had before,
life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.
It is the vision of far off things
seen for the silence they hold.
It is the heart after years
of secret conversing,
speaking out loud in the clear air.

It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.

THE OPENING OF EYES From RIVER FLOW: New and Selected Poems © David Whyte and
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Let us pray. God of all people,

You remembered your children who were enslaved in Egypt, and by the power of your name you
set them free. Remember us and free us from slavery of every kind by the power of your name.
Amen.